

Back to the Office, or not? Learning Lessons from Amazon vs. Spotify

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Abstract: As we are slowly recovering from the COVID-19 crisis and the impact it has had on work and society, organizations are more and more questioning their remote and hybrid work models and are tempted to go back to a more “traditional” approach of working from the office. These initiatives are often referred to as the “return to office” (RTO) movement and have gained popularity and traction among many organizations. At the same time, many organizations have developed hybrid knowledge work models or even “work from anywhere” (WFA) approaches that emphasize location flexibility to their knowledge workers. Both discourses currently co-exist and compete in a discursive arena, that of the discourses that surround the future of work. The process of discursive institutionalization has received a broad interest since the seminal work of Phillips et al. (2004). Research has also emphasized the relationship between this legitimacy and discursive institutionalization (Golant & Sillince, 2007), suggesting that discursive legitimation (Vaara et al., 2024) can be key in a process of institutionalization. In this work, we focus on remote knowledge work and on how two major actors (Amazon and Spotify) have adopted very different practices on the topic of workplace location, with Amazon urging its employees to be back in the office full time and Spotify promoting a full remote or hybrid model of knowledge work. More specifically, we analyze how competing discourses about workplace location co-exist in a discursive arena and how both discourses are competing in a discursive legitimation process. To do so, we rely on official communication from both organizations focusing on official blog posts, reports, as well as media interventions from executives. We then conduct a critical discursive analysis focusing on storytelling that is used to support both RTO and WFA discourses. Findings highlight that Amazon and Spotify’s stories about workplace location share some similarities and differences in how they are built and the opposing ideologies that support these discourses. This work contributes to research on discursive legitimation and knowledge management theory by highlighting that Amazon and Spotify’s discourses about knowledge work and workplace location share some insightful similarities and differences as well as how competing discourses evolve within a discursive arena and how these institutionally innovating (or de-institutionalizing) discourses are competing in the same field.

Keywords: Future of work, Remote work, Knowledge work, Storytelling, Discursive legitimation

1. Theoretical Foundations

Remote work has been around for a long time, even way before knowledge management research and the development of information and communication technology. Messenger and Gschwind (2016), before the Covid-19 pandemic, already mention three generations of telework, starting in the 1970s already. The authors distinguish those three generations according to their flexibility in terms of time and space. The first generation is that of home office, with people mostly working from their homes, either on fixed computers or on paper files to reduce commuting or work beyond traditional work hours. The second generation is that of mobile office, highlighting an increased flexibility in the use of portable devices, while still mostly working asynchronously. The third generation is that of virtual office, and this one is more tied with wireless internet connection and the possibility to work simultaneously and to connect with people located elsewhere (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016). In the early 2010s, remote work became more popular by being associated with the fashion of digital transformation of organizations (Audrin, 2019) and the phenomenon of the new ways of working (Kingma, 2019). In that pre-pandemic stage, many organizations were adopting flexible or hybrid work practices, with more or less resistance from the workforce (Jemine et al., 2019) and regulation challenges (Hendrickx, 2018).

The biggest recent turning point has been the pandemic of Covid-19 that has effectively led many organizations to adopt remote work almost overnight. The full-time working population working remotely in the USA went from 6% to over 33% (Leonardi et al., 2024, p. 194). This tremendous adoption of remote work has led to several debates on knowledge work (Cidade et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022; Zeuge et al., 2023), wellbeing and work-life balance (Becker et al., 2022; Ihm et al., 2024), but mostly on productivity and performance (Chatterjee et al., 2022; Galanti et al., 2021). While empirical findings have led to mixed results (Gajendran et al., 2024), literature has emphasized the role of specific factors that can have a strong impact on

remote work success, ranging from perceived organizational support (Errichiello & Pianese, 2021), supportive knowledge work infrastructures (Paavola et al., 2025), technology adoption (Ng et al., 2022), work design (Lamovšek et al., 2024), and hybrid leadership (Güldenbergh et al., 2023)..

2. Research Design and Methods

Discourse analysis has been used as a common research method in knowledge management research for some time (e.g. Gauthier & Zhang, 2020, Hafeez & Alghatas, 2007; Van Dijk, 2008; Wang, 2025). We conduct a discursive analysis focusing on the discursive foundations that are used to support both RTO and WFA discourses. Discourse plays a key role in organizations as it is identified as “the principal means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are...” (Mumby & Clair, 1997, p. 181). Discourse is instrumental in change as its production and dissemination has a strong influence on how organizational change takes place (Ford & Ford, 2002; Sackmann, 1989). Discourse is thus identified as a way to construct meaning (Sonenshein, 2010), but also as a way to gain and maintain legitimacy (Vaara et al., 2024). Vaara et al. (2024) define discursive legitimation as “the use of language or communication to create a sense of what is positive, favorable, beneficial, understandable, necessary, or otherwise acceptable in a specific setting” (Vaara et al., 2024, p. 2344). More specifically, Vaara et al. (2024) identify five elements of discursive legitimation: strategies, positions, foundations, temporality, and arenas. They define discursive strategies as “the deliberate use of language to develop, maintain, or change perceptions of legitimacy” (Vaara et al., 2024, p. 2353). Initial investigations have relied on Aristotelian rhetoric (Green, 2004), which led future research specifically focus on logos – how discourses display reason and logic for legitimacy purposes – (Brown et al., 2012), as well as on pathos – how discourses invoke emotions and feelings to gain legitimacy – (Roccapriore & Pollock, 2023; Valor et al., 2021; Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018).

2.1 Data Collection and Sample

Data was collected between December 3rd and 10th, 2024. First, a search using the database EBSCO was led with different search queries per company to identify relevant media articles (Jonsson & Buhr, 2010). In the case of Amazon, the query specified the terms “Return to work” and “Return to office” used for their CEO (Andy Jassy) to discuss the topic. In addition, the names of the Former CEO (Bezos) and CEO of AWS (Garman) were also added to expand the search [(amazon company AND return to work OR return to office) AND (Jassy OR Garman OR Bezos)]. A total of 43 results were found, and after a quick clean, only 34 articles were kept. In the case of Spotify, a first search using the term “Work from Anywhere” which is the term used in their official statements, brought no results. Therefore, a broader search was done, using only the company name and the term “work” [Spotify company AND work]. From 85 articles found, only 10 were selected. In the second stage, a search on each company portal was done. From Amazon, their company news site was searched with the same terms, similarly for Spotify where both their HR blog and company news site were observed. This led to the identification of 8 relevant articles on Amazon’s blog (aboutamazon.com), as well as 16 articles on Spotify – 2 on the newsroom (newsroom.spotify.com) and 14 on the HR blog (hrblog.spotify.com). Letters to shareholders as well as sustainability/equity and impact reports from 2020 to 2023 were also collected and analyzed.

2.2 Data Analysis

The analysis focuses on direct communication from both organizations and their executives or spokespeople, as is common in critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013). We follow an inductive approach with constant back and forth over the body of texts, identifying patterns in one organization’s discourses and then confronting them with the other organization’s discourses, and so on, structured around key questions. The purpose of the analysis is to reveal underlying assumptions and examine relationships between the competing discourses and actors (Fairclough, 2013; Van Dijk, 2013).

3. Findings

We structure our findings in two inter-connected parts: we first present the main answers to key questions around RTO and WFA, highlighting which strategies are used to legitimize RTO or WFA and the logics they support; we then discuss how these logics can be associated with more profound ideologies. We illustrate our findings with quotes from the texts that were analyzed.

3.1 Part #1: Answering key Questions About the Future of Work

In this first part, we present how key questions about the future of work are answered, focusing on the following questions: What supports our vision? Who do we do it for? Why do we do it? What are the key success factors of knowledge work?

3.1.1 What supports our vision?

At a very surface-level, both organizations try to legitimize their decision to adopt a radical vision for the future of work, that of RTO or WFA. It is striking to note that both organizations tend to rely on similar rhetorical strategies to justify their decisions. The analysis helps identify four main types of appeals that are used to answer this question: appeal to logos, appeal to ethos, appeal to authority, and appeal to precedent.

Appeal to logos is widely used by both organizations when they rely on data and evidence to support their policies. The evidence can come in various forms, and different types of numbers or types of evidence coming from the organization itself or from the outside can be relied on. For example, Amazon relies on the partial return to the office to justify the full return to the office: *“If anything, the last 15 months we’ve been back in the office at least three days a week has strengthened our conviction about the benefits.”* (Message from CEO Andy Jassy: Strengthening our culture and teams).

This rhetorical strategy is also used in Spotify’s discourse about WFA to detail how WFA supports the growth and hiring of knowledge workers of the organization: *“Roughly half of all new hires in 2021 were hired in a location outside of our main hubs. We wouldn’t be able to continue to grow at the pace we are unless we launched WFA allowing us to hire in new markets. In addition we keep exploring entries into new locations.”* (The Reality of Working From Anywhere).

Appeal to ethos is also used in some instances by both organizations. Statements tend to refer to a feeling, an observation, or a vision, rather than to rely on solid data to support the implementation of policies. Amazon refers to various beliefs and observations to justify their policy in regard to organizational learning and knowledge sharing: *“When we look back over the last five years, we continue to believe that the advantages of being together in the office are significant. I’ve previously explained these benefits (February 2023 post), but in summary, we’ve observed that it’s easier for our teammates to learn, model, practice, and strengthen our culture; collaborating, brainstorming, and inventing are simpler and more effective; teaching and learning from one another are more seamless; and, teams tend to be better connected to one another.”* (Message from CEO Andy Jassy: Strengthening our culture and teams).

In the same way, Spotify refers to beliefs and things that have been noticed: *“At Spotify, we’ve noticed that even when DIB is fully integrated into our people strategy and employee behaviors, we can’t take our eye away. While it’s great being named America’s most loved workplace culture by Newsweek, we definitely don’t want to get comfortable, we believe that to win the game on talent, this is going to be an important part of our success or failure.”* (Community & Belonging In A New Distributed-First Workplace). It is very interesting to note how both organizations refer to an undisclosed “we” in regard to organizational learning, knowledge work and success.

Appeal to authority is used to further justify the policy by relying on specific actors or figures that can help justify – from their legitimate perspectives – the policy. Amazon’s discourse mentions consulting employees and talking to other executives: *“S-team listened to employees, watched how our teams performed, talked to leaders at other companies, and got together on several occasions to discuss if and how we should adjust our approach. We spoke to “60 to 80 CEOs of other companies over the last 18 months,” and “virtually all of them” preferred in-office work.”* (Update from Andy Jassy on return to office plans).

Spotify on their side rather tend to rely on science or academics: *“When building our program we discussed our approach with researchers, read scientific articles as well as met with others who had been on a similar journey to understand what they have learned. We used these insights to make a data-informed decision, meaning we took the learnings and adopted them to our context. We do have many questions though and to help answer them we’ve turned to Stockholm School of Economics. We’ll be conducting a research project with them to further understand the impact of WFA on Energy, Creativity Innovation, Collaboration and Wellbeing.”* (The Reality of Working From Anywhere). It is striking to note how both discourses define authority in a different way: whereas Amazon uses managers as a source of authority, Spotify rather uses evidence-based knowledge and research.

Appeal to precedent is also used by both organizations, which both rely on the past to justify the current policy in a form of continuity. Amazon notably emphasizes serendipity in informal meetings and “breakthrough moments” that have happened through the years: *“The energy and riffing on one another’s ideas happen more freely, and many of the best Amazon inventions have had their breakthrough moments from people staying behind after a meeting and working through ideas on a whiteboard, or continuing the conversation on the walk back from a meeting, or just popping by a teammate’s office later that day with another thought”* (CEO Andy Jassy’s 2022 Letter to Shareholders).

Spotify highlights its global nature and how it requires flexibility in terms of workplace location: *“Yet Spotify’s leadership team recognized early that in-office work wasn’t the only way to achieve company goals. Particularly, the goals of globalization and digitalization necessitated an even more flexible way of working. So becoming “distributed-first,” or enabling employees to work from the places that were the most conducive to them, was a logical next step.”* (Distributed First Contributes to Spotify’s Strength). In both instances, the policy is presented as in line with an organizational vision or strategy, in form of a learning history from the past, with what the organization has been doing or what has made its successes.

3.1.2 Who do we do it for?

Amazon strongly emphasizes their customer-centricity as a supporting logic for RTO. This is identified as some key motive: to serve customers best, and RTO is presented as the way to do it: *“As mentioned earlier, these are unusual times and we’re all learning together what we believe is the best way to work together to make customers’ lives easier and better every day. And with it being so early in our mission, with lots of invention and change in front of us, you can bet that we will continue to adjust as we keep learning what makes most sense for our customers and teams.”* (Amazon offering teams more flexibility as we return to office).

Spotify on its side strongly put the emphasis on knowledge workers, emphasizing how WFA helps attract talent and increase its diversity, but also how it helps retain talent on the longer run by giving more options to employees: *““Our people are our most important asset and it’s crucial that we provide the best possible conditions for them to be productive, stay healthy, and feel connected to the company—and, let’s not forget—to have fun!” says Mattias. “Our workplace plays an important role in attracting and retaining top-talent to make sure the company continues to develop in a positive way.””* (Distributed First Contributes to Spotify’s Strength).

3.1.3 Why do we do it?

Both organizations’ discourses on RTO or WFA can be associated with different knowledge work and organizational learning logics. Amazon emphasizes a goal of knowledge work, organizational learning and integration: *“Learning from one another is easier in-person. Being able to walk a few feet to somebody’s space and ask them how to do something or how they’ve handled a particular situation is much easier than Chiming or Slacking them. Even though people can use the instant message function, people just don’t do it frequently. This apprenticeship and learning model has been the primary reason a lot of companies who’ve returned to the office have done so. We have a lot of functions and roles where learning from peers is very useful and critical. And, our newer employees, especially those who have joined us in the past few years, stand to be most disadvantaged by not having the learning and mentorship opportunities from peers that many of us who joined much earlier had.”* (Update from Andy Jassy on return to office plans).

Spotify on its side rather emphasizes its objective of knowledge work, talent attraction and retention: *““We believe that work isn’t something you come to the office for, it’s something you do” is a philosophy long held by Katarina Berg, Spotify’s Chief HR Officer. “Giving people freedom to choose where they work will make great people more effective, and this flexibility will better support work-family balance, ultimately helping to attract and retain talent.””* (Distributed First Contributes to Spotify’s Strength). The policies are thus framed as a mean to an end, as something that will help the company perform (by achieving innovation or creativity), and create an added value to its knowledge workers. The overall goal is similar, but how this goal should be reached is strongly different.

3.1.4 What are the key success factors of knowledge work?

The discourses also highlight the importance of the knowledge workers in the success of RTO or WFA, but their roles is framed in very different ways. Amazon highlights the need to put knowledge workers in the best environment (through RTO) to make them work better and ultimately make the company more successful:

“We’ve become convinced that collaborating and inventing is easier and more effective when we’re working together and learning from one another in person.” (CEO Andy Jassy’s 2022 Letter to Shareholders).

Spotify rather puts the emphasis on knowledge workers empowerment (through WFA) and trust-based leadership to make them choose what is right for them and ultimately make the company more successful: *“Moving into a distributed world with flexibility for your people requires a trust-based leadership, vs a control-based leadership. You have to ditch your traditional metrics based on an employee’s input, such as when employees arrive or leave the office, the number of hours they spend in the office, the number of sales meetings they attend. Instead, you need to focus wholeheartedly on your employees’ output, such as what impact they have on your mission.”* (Work From (M)anywhere). Creativity is left out in the hands of knowledge workers who have to put themselves in the best conditions for it to happen. Knowledge workers are thus presented as having a critical role in reaching the end goal of organizational performance, but the policies are based on a whole different premise regarding the knowledge workers contribution and how they are trusted or controlled in the process.

Meetings and technology further crystallize this opposition. Amazon tends to defend a work ethic that relies heavily on meetings and informal communication: *“When you’re in-person, people tend to be more engaged, observant, and attuned to what’s happening in the meetings and the cultural clues being communicated. For those unsure about why something happened or somebody reacted a certain way, it’s easier to ask ad-hoc questions on the way to lunch, in the elevator, or the hallway; whereas when you’re at home, you’re less likely to do so.”* (Update from Andy Jassy on return to office plans).

Spotify rather defends a work ethic that challenges the need for meetings: *“To remain productive and support Spotify’s wellbeing, we need to ensure that meetings help, not hinder productivity. We will be more cognizant about the purpose of meetings and ask ourselves how we can continue to work across distributed time zones without just relying on meetings to move projects forward.”* (Our Ways of Working Survey Results: Listening, learning and Leaping Forward).

On the topic of technology, Amazon tends to adopt a somehow critical discourse about technology, framing it as a hindering factor: *“This rapid interjecting happens more often in-person because people feel less inhibited about jumping in or even interrupting sometimes. This interjecting happens less frequently in virtual calls because it blocks out all speakers when it transpires. Also, teams working on new ideas often find that a whiteboard enhances the group understanding and iterating.”* (Update from Andy Jassy on return to office plans).

Spotify rather presents technology has a helping factor: *“This is probably one of the most challenging areas for HR teams around the world today, but with the advancement of technologies, we are lucky enough to have an array of tools and supporting systems for all our needs and purposes.”* (Creating Connectivity in a Distributed Workforce).

Finally, another key success factor that appears in both discourses is that of knowledge work itself, and how it should be performed. Here again, both organizations’ discourses present very different perspectives on the topic of knowledge work. Amazon’s discourse presents a vision of knowledge work that is done together and simultaneously: *“It’s also easier for leaders to teach when they have more people in a room at one time, can better assess whether the team is digesting the information as intended; and if not, how they need to adjust their communication.”* (Update from Andy Jassy on return to office plans). In this perspective, RTO is critical to ensure successful knowledge work.

Spotify discourse rather emphasizes a vision of knowledge work that is distributed and done asynchronously: *“Within that, we defaulted to asynchronous work to reduce the dependency on team members being in the same time zone or physical location. Flexing this async muscle has provided us with valuable insights and experiences. To be specific, asynchronous work is advantageous for numerous reasons: deep focus work, decreased reliance on meetings to get things done, flexibility, to name a few.”* (Work From Anywhere: An Evolution). In this perspective, WFA is critical to ensure successful knowledge work.

3.1.5 Part #2: Underlying logics

In this second part, we discuss how the key questions about the future of work presented above might be associated with more profound logics that may clash. More specifically, the analysis highlights three key dilemmas at the root of the RTO versus WFA debate, on the topics of organizational focus, knowledge work transformation, and knowledge management approach.

3.1.6 Organizational focus

Organizational focus has been discussed in the “Who do we do it for?” question, and the opposition between the customer-centric approach of Amazon and the employee-centric approach of Spotify is striking. This dilemma is rooted in two very different logics about the focus of organizations. Amazon’s perspective is in line with the logic of “the customer is king”, which puts the customer as the main priority (e.g., “*Our thinking is predicated on what we believe will be most beneficial for customers*” – Amazon updates return-to-office guidance) – everything else holding less importance.

Spotify’s perspective is in line with the logic of the service-profit chain which puts the employee as the main priority (e.g., “*Our people are our most important asset*” – Distributed First Contributes to Spotify’s Strength), as the starting point of the value chain. In that approach, the premise is that satisfied employees will perform better and lead to more satisfied customers.

3.1.7 Knowledge work transformation

Amazon presents Covid as an interruption, a challenge that has disrupted the traditional ways of doing knowledge work before: “During the pandemic, our employees rallied to get work done from home and did everything possible to keep up with the unexpected circumstances that presented themselves. It was impressive and I’m proud of the way our collective team came together to overcome unprecedented challenges for our customers, communities, and business. But, we don’t think it’s the best long-term approach.” (CEO Andy Jassy’s 2022 Letter to Shareholders). This seems to rather be rooted in a logic the future is the past, i.e., that things should go back to as they were before Covid.

Spotify tends to present Covid-19 as an opportunity to change things for good and get more radical about their workplace location approach: “The future of how we work has been a popular topic inside the walls of Spotify for a while now. Our leadership team has long championed the idea that digitalization and globalization are massive drivers for a more flexible workplace that better suits both our band and our business. Needless to say, the events of the last year accelerated this thinking—and there’s no better time than now to transition into a distributed-first model—a workplace that isn’t built on the premise that employees need to gather in an office with traditional desk setups.” (Distributed-First Is the Future of Work at Spotify). This seems to rather be rooted in a logic that the future is different, i.e., that companies should embrace distributed knowledge work.

3.1.8 Knowledge management approach

The dilemma on knowledge management approach can be summarized in opposed logics of control versus trust. Amazon discourse highlights some traditional views about knowledge management and how leaders should lead and overview their teams: “*It’s also easier for leaders to teach when they have more people in a room at one time, can better assess whether the team is digesting the information as intended; and if not, how they need to adjust their communication.*” (Update from Andy Jassy on return to office plans). This can be associated with a logic of control-based traditional knowledge management, in which the organization more directly prescribes what employees should be doing and how, as well as closely monitors their behavior.

Spotify on its side clearly emphasizes the importance of trust: “*Moving into a distributed world with flexibility for your people requires a trust-based leadership, vs a control-based leadership. You have to ditch your traditional metrics based on an employee’s input, such as when employees arrive or leave the office, the number of hours they spend in the office, the number of sales meetings they attend. Instead, you need to focus wholeheartedly on your employees’ output, such as what impact they have on your mission.*” (Work From (M)anywhere). This can be tied with the previous point on knowledge work transformation, in which Spotify’s logic of a different future can be associated with a trust-based future.

4. Discussion

This paper aimed to understand how discourses about knowledge management and workplace location may co-exist in a discursive arena and how they may be competing in a discursive legitimation process. The discursive analysis of official communication from Amazon and Spotify highlights some similarities and differences in how the discourses are built and the foundations that support these discourses.

More specifically, it is interesting to note that similar rhetorical strategies are used to legitimize diametrically opposed knowledge management approaches and workplace location policies, both organizations using the same types of appeals. In their discursive legitimation process, both companies thus seem to be relying on the same type of “weapons” to convince their audience of the appropriateness of their change initiatives. In

comparison with previous research on Aristotelian rhetoric, our analysis did not find a strong emphasis on pathos (Roccapriore & Pollock, 2023; Valor et al., 2021; Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018) but still found both categories of logos and ethos as well represented in both organizations' narratives (Brown et al., 2012; Green, 2004). As with Vaara's work (2014), this research suggests that other strategies (beyond the three classical ones) can be used by organizations.

Although marked by many similarities in the points that they focus on or on the rhetorical strategies that they use, both competing discourses seem to be marked by very distinct logics about knowledge work and its future. The analysis identifies three main logics of organizational focus, work transformation, and knowledge management approach, that are – to an extent – correlated and are suggesting different foundations or ideological assumptions to legitimize RTO or WFA. Previous work has identified different forms of ideologies mobilized to legitimize organizational practices (Vaara et al., 2006; Vaara, 2014). The findings from this work on their hand seem to be more rooted in ideologies about knowledge management, organizational learning, leadership, and on the opposition between control and trust, past and future (REF). The debate on RTO versus WFA seems thus to be more than a discussion about workplace location, but rather competing ideologies about the future of work, looking to innovate institutionally (Deephouse et al., 2017) or to “deinstitutionalize” (Brown et al., 2012; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). As legitimacy depends on the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), the final judge of the legitimation attempts of RTO or WFA is likely to be the relevant audience (knowledge workers).

5. Conclusion

This work investigates the discursive legitimation of two competing discourses about knowledge work and workplace location, that of RTO mandates by Amazon and WFA initiatives by Spotify. Data consists of media articles and corporate communication coming from both Amazon and Spotify. The critical discursive analysis highlights that Amazon and Spotify's discourses about knowledge work and workplace location share some similarities and differences. This research offers new insights into discursive legitimation by analyzing a specific situation of competing discourses and how they are built and feed off of each other. It also uncovers how some specific points of contention crystalize the discursive legitimation on key topics, and how the way these points of contention are addressed can help uncover different ideologies that can explain why organizations decide to implement one policy or another in the first place.

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